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The Massachusetts Case: A Personal Account

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The author was deeply involved in the events leading to the passage of the Education Reform Act of 1993, the implementation of the reforms (as a member of the Board of Education and then, chair of the Massachusetts Reform Review Commission) and has now been re-appointed to the Board of Education (after an eleven year hiatus) as its new Chairman.

Introduction

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is frequently, and with solid justification, considered to be the poster child of successful, systemic, standards-based school reform. There is ample evidence on which to build such an assertion including such facts as our students’ performance on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), our state standards and assessments consistently being recognized as among the best in the country, and our statewide graduation rates besting the national averages.

However, policymakers and practitioners are forced to recognize that Massachusetts has not fully achieved what school reform set out to achieve – an equitable and excellent system of education for all, one that provides every child with an opportunity to achieve a high level of performance and become prepared for a lifetime of learning. Beneath all the glowing testimony to its success, Massachusetts, like literally every other state, still yields disturbing evidence of persistent achievement gaps which must be closed if the overriding promise of education reform, excellence and equity for all, is to be realized. For example, while 84% of the Class of 2008 passed the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) examinations, in both Mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA), on the first try, only 61% of Hispanic students and 68% of African-American students earned this distinction. In addition, while the statewide graduation rate for the Class of 2006 cohort is 80%, this falls to 62% in urban areas. (DOE Data)

It is still the case that in Massachusetts, as in virtually the entire country, educational attainment correlates closely with socioeconomic status. Education reform was supposed to make socio-economic status irrelevant as a factor in educational achievement, but that has not happened anywhere, yet. Maybe the ideal was painfully naïve, however I believe we can do much better, even with the limited tools and resources at our disposal.

We have a long way to go.

Success Story

The Massachusetts story is a complex one, but one of significant interest, since it presents an unusual history of intra-governmental cooperation between the executive, legislative and judicial branches coupled with exceptional collaboration between the major political parties and between government and the private sector, notably the business community, various non-profit groups, and philanthropic organizations.
At the heart of the Massachusetts school reform success story is the sweeping education reform bill entitled “The Education Reform Act of 1993” (MERA). This comprehensive legislation was created in response to a report from the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), entitled “Every Child A Winner!” This report provided a strong argument for the sweeping overhaul of the state’s public school system. In 1991, a new Governor, William Weld, called for a summit on education at which the top leadership of both branches of the Legislature agreed to collaborate with the executive branch and the business community, represented by MBAE, in preparing a major education reform bill which would contain significant new funding in exchange for high standards and genuine accountability. More than two years after the original summit, in June of 1993, after complex and prolonged negotiations between the Executive branch, the House, the Senate and MBAE, the bill was signed into law.

Several days before the Reform Act was signed into law, the state’s Supreme Judicial Court issued a long awaited decision in an important school finance case. The court’s involvement stemmed from a school finance equity complaint that was filed against the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1978 and amended in 1990. The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court issued its opinion in this case, McDuffy v. Secretary of the Executive Office of Education, in June 1993. According to Rhoda Schneider, General Counsel for the Massachusetts Department of Education, “the decision…imposes on the Commonwealth an enforceable duty to provide an education for all its children, rich and poor, in every city and town through the public schools….the court held that the Commonwealth had failed to meet its constitutional obligation.” The court’s decision “established the standards against which education reform efforts in Massachusetts would be judged.” The decision “left it to the legislative and executive branches of state government to devise a remedy that would meet the constitutional duty.” Finally, the court authorized “a single justice to retain jurisdiction to determine, in his or her discretion, whether appropriate legislative action has been taken within a reasonable time.” (Schneider)

State courts have played an important, but not the preeminent, leadership role in the Massachusetts success story. There is no concrete evidence to connect the state government’s action in developing this Act to any apprehensions about the outcome of the then fifteen-year-old McDuffy case. During the course of the development of MERA, government leaders were uncertain about the timing of a verdict and, more importantly, about the content and direction of the verdict. Once the verdict was rendered, however, the McDuffy case played an important role in reinforcing the Legislature’s and the Governor’s determination to fully implement the ambitious and costly provisions of the various reforms described by this legislation. A subsequent, high profile education case, Hancock v. Driscoll, initiated in 1999, alleged that “the Commonwealth was failing to provide public school students the constitutionally required education outlined in the McDuffy decision.” The case was tried in Superior Court in 2003, with the Court ruling in support of the Commonwealth’s efforts to provide every child with an adequate education. The Court moved to “dispose of the case in its entirety.” The Court’s Chief Justice, Margaret Marshall wrote, “No one, including the defendants, disputes that serious inadequacies in public education remain. But the Commonwealth is moving systematically to address those deficiencies and continues to make education reform a fiscal priority.” (Schneider)
The central architecture of the Commonwealth’s reform called for the creation of educational standards, an assessment system, and accountability for various parties in the educational process, including schools and districts. This new accountability system was coupled with a massive state refinancing of public education. Massachusetts put real money behind the educational ideals embodied in its standards. During the implementation phase of the reforms, Massachusetts became widely recognized as having some of the nation’s best and most challenging standards coupled with a highly respected assessment system, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). At the same time, massive infusions of new state aid were injected into the state’s education funding formula with the overwhelming majority of these funds going to the state’s most economically disadvantaged communities. Unlike many states, Massachusetts allocated money to help districts and communities meet the reform demands. Spending rose from a state average in 1994 of $5,235 per pupil to $9,096 in 2005, a 74% increase or 25% increase in 2005 dollars. More importantly, the Education Trust reported in 2004 that Massachusetts’ high poverty districts (the lowest quartile) received $1300 more than the state’s most affluent quartile of districts. (High minority districts received $1663 more than low-minority districts.) According to the Ed Trust report, Massachusetts was the only state in the nation with a negative “funding gap,” a positive indicator of progress.

Over the course of reform implementation in Massachusetts, there was steady improvement in students’ educational performance. As mentioned earlier, Massachusetts became and is still regarded as one of the nation’s leading reform states and for good reason. Massachusetts students top the nation on several indicators of educational achievement. Massachusetts 4th and 8th graders ranked first or tied for first on all 4 examinations of the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), and have held this unique position since 2005. MA students are the first to best the nation in both reading and mathematics at both the 4th and 8th grade level.

Student performance on our state assessment, the MCAS, has also risen dramatically since the tests’ introduction in 1998. More than half of all tenth graders score within the ‘proficient’ or ‘advanced’ categories in both subjects, English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics. In addition, MCAS passing rates have considerably improved since the test’s introduction. Between 1998 and 2004, the failure rate of 10th graders taking the MCAS has dropped 30% in math (from 45% to 15%) and 23% in ELA (from 34% to 11%). While students are given several chances to pass the examination and earn their Competency Determination (CD) between 10th and 12th grade and beyond, the vast majority of students in the Classes of 2007 and 2008 passed both the math and ELA examinations on the first try. The passing rates for the first administration of the examinations were 82% for the Class of 2007 and 84% for the Class of 2008, up from 68% in 2001 and 48% in 2000. Massachusetts’ academic standards have also been heralded as a model. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation awarded Massachusetts with straight “A’s” in their 2006 “State of the State Standards” Report. The report evaluated performance in the subject areas of mathematics, English Language Arts, science, US History and World History. Receiving all “A’s” represents a considerable improvement since 2000, when the Fordham Foundation gave Massachusetts two “A’s”, one “B” and two “D’s”, resulting in a “B-” average for the state.

Finally, the Commonwealth also has one of the best records of performance on the SAT, despite slight declines over the past two years that are consistent with many other states’ dips in
performance. Fourteen straight years of improvement along with steady increases in participation rates, especially among racial and ethnic minority subgroups, are another indicator that we’re on the right track.

The Challenges

Despite the protest and skepticism of many MCAS critics, the Massachusetts strategy of high standards and high stakes was uncommonly successful. Notwithstanding the positive evidence that Massachusetts’ standards are indeed working, achievement and educational service gaps continue to persist. While there is evidence of the closing of achievement gaps between various demographic sub-groups at basic levels of attainment, glaring gaps at the more advanced levels of educational performance remain, and the most recent MCAS results indicate that these gaps can be found in the areas of science, mathematics and English Language Arts. The MCAS science exam results paint a bleak picture: while 39% of White students and 43% of Asian students scored ‘proficient’ or better on the 2007 administration of the exam, these figures fall to 8% for African American students and 7% for Hispanic students. Also, while 52% of White 8th grade students and 65% of Asian 8th grade students achieved proficient or above on the 2007 MCAS math examination, less than 20% of both Hispanic students and Black students earned this distinction. In addition, on the Grade 10 MCAS ELA examination, at least 75% of both White and Asian students scored proficient or better while 42% of Hispanic students and 47% of Black students earned this distinction. Looking at all students who scored “advanced” on these two examinations indicates similar performance gaps among subgroups. (DOE Data)

This year marks the first time the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE) has calculated and reported graduation rates by tracking a cohort for at least 4 years. While 80% of all students in the Class of 2006 cohort graduate in 4 years, only 64% of African American students and 57% if Hispanic students share this accomplishment. In comparison, 85% of White students and 84% of Asian students have met this goal.

The stark reality is that our public education system is losing significant numbers of students each year, with the state dropout rate at its highest level since 1998. 18% of African American students and 26% of Hispanic students from the Class of 2006 cohort dropped out of school. The picture is worse when also considering gender. Slightly less than 60% of African American males and slightly more than 50% of Hispanic males graduated within 4 years. The dropout rates for these young people are also sobering. More than 1/5 of African American males in the Class of 2006 dropped out before reaching graduation. More than 30% of Hispanic males in the 2006 cohort also dropped out. The dropout rates for female minorities, while lower than their male counterparts, are also disturbing. (They range from about 14% to 23%.) The differences in graduation rates do not solely apply to racial and ethnic minorities – graduation rates for special education students and students who are Limited English Proficient (LEP) also fall well below the statewide cohort rate.

The existence of these gaps, and the fact that we regularly measure and display the results, forces us, as policy-makers and practitioners, to regularly confront the gap between our aspirations and current performance. It obligates us to dig deeper to find solutions to longstanding educational problems. Finally, this relentless accountability pressure also makes it imperative that we work
together, understanding that only a collaborative approach will enable us to fully accomplish our ambitious agenda.

Moving Forward; Closing Gaps

Education reform has arguably lost momentum in Massachusetts. Even though tens of thousands of people have worked tirelessly to achieve our educational ideals, we must redouble our efforts and move forward boldly to do whatever needs to be done to improve educational performance at all levels. As a state, we also must recognize that our educational challenges are complex and will not lend themselves to simplistic solutions. We will need to be thoughtful, persistent and courageous in order to move ahead. Now is the time.

In Massachusetts, one of the biggest complaints from the education field in the past decade is that practitioners’ voices/perspectives are not being heard by the state’s policy making establishment. Since we now have a new Governor in the Commonwealth and with him, a new education advisor and recently appointed Board Chairs for the Department of Education, Department of Early Education and Care and the Board of Higher Education, we enjoy a unique opportunity to re-engage the public, challenging them to start thinking, strategizing and working with policymakers on bold, collaborative efforts that will inform the next phase of education reform.

The creation and passage of the MERA of 1993 was a powerful example of this sort of collaboration and cooperation, which must be reinvigorated if we hope to instill a continued sense of urgency in our work, especially with regard to minimizing achievement gaps. This notion of collaboration, however, is easier said than done. Collaboration between political parties and the various branches of government is complex and challenging, but our own experiences show that such collaboration is not only possible but also sustainable, as indicated by the Massachusetts experience over the last decade and a half.

As the new Board Chair for the Department of Education, I intend to emphasize the closing of achievement gaps in my tenure, instilling a sense of urgency in this work. Restoring a strong working relationship between the world of policy making and the field of practice is also essential. It is extremely important for educators to know that the Board sees them as the source of solutions to our problems, not the source of the problems themselves.

It is also time for us to recognize that schools and educators need support in order to build the necessary expertise to achieve our unprecedented goal of educating all students to high levels. We will need to focus tirelessly on improving the quality of teaching and learning in our state’s classrooms. There are many approaches to improving instruction -- from better preparation to induction to professional development and career ladders.

We also must accept that standards and accountability are critical cornerstones that collectively provide the foundation for education reform, but a foundation alone is insufficient. The Commonwealth needs to provide the resources, expertise, direction and opportunities for our educators to do the job. In addition, the job of educating all students goes beyond the boundaries of traditional K-12 schools. Early childhood education, human and social services, expanded
school time and after-school and summer programming are all needed in addition to a robust Department of Education capable of providing high quality technical assistance and support to all school districts.

The Problem with the Paradigm

The Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy recently produced a book on the Boston Public Schools that presents a fascinating analysis of leadership and strategy over an extended time period in a relatively small urban district. While it is a story of progress, its most interesting feature is that it became a study in the limits of school reform. The Boston Public Schools were fortunate to have optimal conditions: a highly expert, enlightened superintendent in Tom Payzant, an education mayor in Thomas Menino who has both mayoral control of the school board and maintained positive relations with the Superintendent; a focused set of long-term strategies aimed squarely at the improvement of instruction; support from community organizations, politicians, philanthropic organizations (both locally and on the national level) and positive labor-management relations. Despite all of this, at the end of Superintendent Payzant’s tenure, disturbing and persistent achievement gaps remain in the Boston Public Schools. This raises the question: What is the problem? What more needs to be done?

The Boston story suggests, as Richard Rothstein, and others have argued more generally, that our current school paradigm and our notion of schools as the great equalizer, which will lift students out of poverty to high levels of learning and excellence while also providing equity for all, is naïve. Evidence suggests that schooling, by itself, 180 days a year, 6 hours a day, accounting for a small fraction of a child’s early life, is, on average and for most children, too weak a treatment to overcome the injuries of poverty. Standards have forced a growing recognition that the treatment of schooling is simply not a strong enough “cure” for what reformers have in mind – all students achieving at high levels – in a social environment characterized by widespread inequalities.

In Massachusetts, we have made progress, but to sustain the high level of success that our students have achieved since the passage of MERA, while reaching many others who are not currently doing well, we must not only significantly improve the quality of instruction at scale, but we must recognize that instructional improvement alone, while necessary, will be insufficient to help most poor children achieve high standards.

These observations and considerations have led to the realization that we must pursue a dual agenda, one which I refer to as “instruction plus.” This agenda retains our focus on high academic achievement for all children yet also tackles the system’s ability to meet non-academic needs, especially for economically disadvantaged children. In order to meet these diverse needs, we must formulate a powerful strategy that will guide us as we pursue this dual agenda. A critical component of the strategy will be offering a menu of interventions such as pre-natal care, high quality early childhood education, wrap-around human and social services, and significantly expand learning time. These services will undoubtedly cost money and take will, but they are a crucial element in our educational reform strategy going forward.
In order to envision the need for this “dual agenda,” I need not look further than my own daughter’s classroom. My five-year-old daughter, Addy, is a student in an urban public school system. Unlike many of her peers, she has had every advantage imaginable. Pre-natal care, high-quality preschool and early childhood education, excellent health care, two loving and reasonably educated parents, five enthralled siblings, summer camps, a learning rich environment at home and travel to eight foreign countries. Addy is in a classroom side-by-side with children who have had none of this exposure and experience, and sometimes, worse. Our educational system asks the schools to take those disadvantaged children and use the same “treatment,” the same resources, time, instruction and curriculum, and equalize those children’s learning with Addy’s learning. It is time for us to acknowledge that this is not going to happen, and even though schools are accountable for our massive investment in them, we cannot scapegoat schools when they fail to work generalized miracles.

The case of Addy and her peers illustrates the need to redefine the paradigm. Our “one-size-fits-all” strategies do not align with our goals. We need to differentiate learning opportunities for each child and adopting a one-size-fits-all approach will not help us achieve our ambitious vision for our public education system. The new paradigm would have us, as a society, find a way to do for all children what we do for our own. Measures such as wrap-around services may be effectively utilized to boost students’ readiness to learn; introducing flexibilities through increased time allows for additional instruction and enrichment; and providing high-quality early education at the early, critical periods, can have a lifelong impact. We must provide every child the resources and supports to attain the high standards we proclaim.

One of the key resources that economically disadvantaged children need is more learning time. Children don’t see money in our school systems, they see learning opportunities. Our current “one size fits all” model of distributing educational services and allocating time is ill suited to the work of educating each and every student to a high standard. Different children have different needs. Each one needs the quality and quantity of instruction necessary to get him/her to the standards. Learning is the constant and time should vary to meet the needs of the learner. What we do now is analogous to having a hospital in which every patient, irrespective of ailment, who entered the front door would be prescribed the same treatment for the same length of stay in the hope that such an approach would generally contribute to public health. We wouldn’t do it in medicine and we shouldn’t do it in education.

It’s as if we’re running a hundred yard dash in which we know some children start 50 yards from the finish line while others start 300 yards from the finish line. We expect them all to finish at roughly the same time in roughly the same place and when, predictably, it doesn’t happen, we blame the schools even though the schools have the children for only about 15% of their young lives.

Something is wrong with our strategy, our theory of action, our paradigm.

Finally, the power of standards-based reform is that, time and again, it forces us to look at achievement results and requires us to face those troubling gaps in achievement. This obliges us to consider, time and again, what will be necessary for us to fully actualize our goals and vision for our educational system, and how we will go about getting there. This reflective discipline of
standards-based reform is a positive development and will help drive the agenda of education reform.

Recognizing that it will take much more to get the job done does not absolve educators from the responsibility of being held accountable for effectively utilizing the enormous investment society makes in our schools. However, we can no longer afford to be naïve about what it will take to achieve equity and excellence. We must work collaboratively to find solutions and utilize our leadership positions to educate the policy makers and the general public on the enormity and urgency of the task before us. An unwavering commitment coupled with sufficient resources – both financial and human– will allow for our achievement vision to be fulfilled in Massachusetts.